

Does God Predestine People to Hell? Joshua 11:1-23

Day 1: Joshua 11:1-23 What is the big idea?

Joshua 10 and 11 are largely parallel both in content and in structure. The former describes a coalition of cities in southern Canaan attacking Israel and suffering defeat and destruction. The latter describes a coalition of cities in northern Canaan attacking Israel and suffering defeat and destruction. Apart from some details, the structure of the two sections is remarkably similar:

- a leading city recruits allies for battle against Israel 11:1-5 cf. 10:1-5
- God assures Israel of victory 11:6 cf. 10:8
- Israel launches a surprise attack 11:7 cf. 10:9
- Yahweh gives Israel victory 11:8 cf. 10:10-14
- Israel destroys the cities and their inhabitants 11:10-15 cf. 10:28-39
- concluding summary 11:16-23 cf. 10:40-42.

The main point of chapter 11, as of chapter 10, is: "With God's help, Israel conquers the land, defeating the coalition of northern Canaanite cities, just as they had defeated the southern Canaanite cities." Or, to quote Joshua 11, "'Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them over to [you]'" (11:6).

This central idea entails two ramifications. For one, God is faithful to his promises. Several times he had promised Abraham and his descendants a land of their own. He anticipated that the promise would take four centuries to fulfill, and at the stipulated time, he now fulfills the promise. The other ramification: even possessing the explicit promise from God, Israel still needs to participate in securing the land. Their participation takes two forms: first, they must be faithful to God, so that he will continue to assist them; second, they need to do their part, fighting the battle, not sitting back and leaving everything to God.

Day 2: Joshua 11:1-23 Does God predestine the Canaanites for destruction?

Shifting direction, the similarity between Joshua 10 and 11 raises an important question: Are these two chapters simply repetitive (first Israel attacked the southern cities, and then they attacked the northern cities)? Or are there variations in the accounts that legitimately point to additional lessons?

One new point in the second chapter is its explanation for the Canaanite persistence in attacking Israel. Though Israel had already defeated the superpower Egypt and two of the Canaanite kings (Sihon and Og), the leaders of Jericho presumed they could conquer these invaders; Rahab alone made peace with them (Joshua 2). The Gibeonites drew the obvious conclusion, and so tricked Israel into a treaty (Joshua 9), but the other southern cities resorted

instead to war (Joshua 10). Then, after the defeat of the southern armies, the northern cities form another coalition to attack Israel, and are in turn defeated. The author concludes: "Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle" (11:19).

Why this stubborn adherence to a flawed strategy? Why did the northern kings think that they would succeed where the mighty Egypt, Sihon and Og, and the southern coalition had already failed? The author explains: "It was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel," (11:20). In other words: "God made them do it, and then destroyed them for doing it."

So it seems, if all we have to go on is Joshua 11.

And from here, it is only a short step to the doctrine of reprobation, that God predetermines who will go to hell, ensuring their fate before they are born.

But Joshua 11 is not all we have to go on.

The concept of divine hardening is developed more fully during Israel's earlier exodus from Egypt, and then again, much later by Paul in Romans 9. So we look to these two texts to see what hardening entails, and whether God predetermines both earthly destruction and eternal condemnation.

Day 3: Exodus 7:1-23 Does God predestine Pharaoh for destruction?

As God commissions Moses to rescue Israel from Egypt, he also tells him what to anticipate: "'I will harden [Pharaoh's] heart so that he will not let the people go...'" (4:23). Leading up to Moses' first encounter with the king, God again announces, "'I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you'" (7:3-4).

Is Pharaoh merely a pawn in the hand of God, to be manipulated however he wants? If Pharaoh blindly fulfills the decree of God, is it moral for God to punish him?

A closer look at the fulfillment of these predictions clarifies God's role in hardening, and its effect on Pharaoh. Before God ever acts, Pharaoh's heart is already hard (7:13,14,22). Then, in response to the early plagues, Pharaoh further hardens his own heart (8:15,32; cf. 9:34). Only subsequently, as the third step in the process, God hardens Pharaoh's heart (9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10).

God is not forcing Pharaoh into a position that he would otherwise not have chosen. Pharaoh opposes both God and Israel on his own initiative. Then, in the face of the early plagues, Pharaoh strengthens his resolve to stand firm in his opposition to God and Israel. God acts only in the third stage, granting Pharaoh the tenacity to stand firm in the face of increasing pressure. God does not cause Pharaoh's initial resistance. He simply strengthens Pharaoh's resolve to persist in his chosen course of action.

Day 4: Romans 9:1-29 Does God predestine some people for hell?

Paul recalls this Exodus narrative in his discussion of divine hardening in Romans 9. Many well-intentioned Christians read Romans 9 to endorse the doctrine of double predestination (or, reprobation), which affirms that in eternity past, regardless of anything that individuals had already done or would ever do, God chose some for salvation, and others for perdition. This understanding is widespread among informed Christians, and causes many anxiety: would God really predetermine some people to eternal damnation regardless of how they live? Arguably, this view makes three mistakes: (1) it misinterprets Romans 9; (2) it overlooks Romans 10, and (3) it overlooks Romans 11. We look all three of these issues over the next three days. The argument is not light and heart-warming, but it is important.

Does Romans 9 affirm reprobation? Not if read carefully.

First, Romans 9 is actually answering a different question, and it is always risky to take the answer to one question, and apply it to a different question. The question of Romans 9 is, "Given that most Jews do not believe in Christ, and so are under condemnation (9:1-5), has God broken his promise to the Jewish people?" (9:6). In brief, the answer is, "No, God never promised to save all; only to save some" (9:7-9). So the chapter is not about who is condemned and why; it is about who is saved and why. Those who are saved are saved because God chose to show them mercy, not because they had some special merit (9:10-16).

Secondly, if some are saved because God decided to show them mercy, is it fair to infer the inverse, that others are condemned because God chose to reject them, regardless of any actual demerit? Had Paul intended that, we would expect him to quote God to the effect that, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will condemn whom I will condemn" (9:15). Or we would expect him to write, "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he condemns whom he wants to condemn" (9:18). Or to construct his analogy, "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for formal use and some to smash against the floor" (9:21). He writes none of these, apparently because God does none of these.

Instead, Paul affirms a discontinuity between the way condemnation and mercy function. Mercy is indeed predetermined from eternity past: "He did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared *in advance* for glory" (9:23). Condemnation, however, functions in totally the opposite way: God does not predetermine whom he will condemn; instead, even after people demonstrate that they deserve destruction, God still patiently withholds condemnation. (Instead of "prepared for destruction", likely "ready for destruction" is a more appropriate translation of the Greek.)

Mercy pays forward, so to speak, while condemnation accrues in arrears.

Day 5: Romans 9:30-10:4 Why, then, are the condemned condemned?

If we want to ascertain why the condemned are condemned, we do not go to Romans 9, for the simple reason that Romans 9 is not answering that question. Instead, we go to Romans 10, for the obvious reason that Romans 10 is answering that question: "Israel, who pursued ... righteousness has not attained it. Why not?" (9:30-33).

Why are the Jews – and everyone else who rejects Christ – condemned?

Paul never suggests that it is because of God's decree to condemn.

Instead, they are condemned for two reasons, which are really flip sides of the same reason: (a) they consider themselves capable of establishing their own righteousness, and so, (b) they do not lay hold of the righteousness which comes by Christ, and only by Christ (10:1-4).

So here is why the condemned are condemned ... not because God decreed in eternity past to condemn them, but because they are self-satisfied and therefore reject the offer of salvation through Christ.

Day 6: Romans 11:1-32 Has God predestined the lost to hell?

Paul's argument in Romans 11 provides strong argument against the doctrine of reprobation. Having just affirmed that the majority of his Jewish contemporaries do not accept Christ, and so are under judgment, he asks, "Has God rejected his people?" (Romans 11:1). In the aftermath of Romans 10, the question is not, "Did God predetermine to reject his people?", but "Now that his people have rejected Christ, has God in turn rejected them?"

Most definitely not, Paul insists, and for two reasons. For one, some Jews have accepted Christ and are saved, so it is clearly too broad to suppose that God has rejected his people en bloc (11:1-4). More importantly, this stupor and judgment that have come upon them are not total and permanent, but only partial and temporary. God loves them still, and a day is coming when he will have mercy on them, and intervene to bring many to faith in Christ (11:25-27).

This is exactly the opposite of reprobation. God does not predetermine from eternity whom to condemn, overruling any desire they may have for salvation. Just the opposite: he intervenes with some of those who reject him, calling them to repentance and delivering them from condemnation.

So, why did the Canaanites come under divine destruction? And why did most of Jesus' contemporaries reject him? And why do people still today refuse to believe in Jesus? Because God intervenes to prevent their repentance? No. Just the opposite. God is patient, and provides opportunity for repentance. Though if we insist, he may eventually grant us the resolve to persist our way into hell. We resist his mercy at our own peril: he does not force us to be condemned, but neither will he force us to be saved.